



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
SCOTT M. STRINGER

June 17, 2019

Rick Cotton
Executive Director
Port Authority of NY and NJ
4 World Trade Center
150 Greenwich Street
New York, NY 10007

Patrick J. Foye
Chairman and CEO
Metropolitan Transportation Authority
2 Broadway
New York, NY 10004

Re: LaGuardia Airport AirTrain

Dear Mr. Cotton and Chairman Foye:

I am writing in regard to the proposed AirTrain connection from LaGuardia Airport to Willets Point, Queens. As Comptroller, one of my jobs is to safeguard the long-term economic health of our city, and there are few investments more important to that future than providing fast, reliable, and environmentally sustainable transit options throughout the region. Improving access to the LaGuardia Airport is an important aspect of our regional transit planning; however, I am concerned about the capacity constraints that the proposed AirTrain may place on the surrounding subway, bus, and commuter rail lines.

If the AirTrain succeeds in shifting some LaGuardia trips from taxis and private automobiles to public transit, it will have a significant impact on the 7 Train, the LIRR Port Washington Line, and the Q48 bus, particularly at Willets Points. The Port Authority forecasts that the LaGuardia AirTrain will service 6.6 million annual trips in 2025 and 8.4 million in 2045—both significant sums—and it is therefore essential that connecting transit lines and stations have sufficient capacity to handle increased traffic.ⁱ

In light of the potential strain on subway, bus, and LIRR that the proposed LaGuardia AirTrain would create, I respectfully ask that you provide the Comptroller's Office with answers to the following questions by July 15, 2019:

LIRR

Mets-Willets Point LIRR Station Upgrades

In the MTA's 2015-2019 capital plan, \$75 million was initially allocated to the Long Island Rail Road for the "replacement and upgrade" of its Mets-Willets Point Station to "accommodate large volumes of railroad customers" in preparation for the proposed LaGuardia AirTrain Station. This was reduced to \$15 million in April 2018 to "reflect the current pace of the effort" and has since been cut to \$10 million without explanation. Given that the LaGuardia AirTrain is currently being slated for a 2022 completion date, these delays and budget cuts are concerning.

- Please explain why funding and construction has been delayed at the Mets-Willets Point Station.
- Do you expect that the station will be completed and fully ADA accessible by 2022?
- If not, how do you anticipate that the LIRR will accommodate AirTrain passengers at Willets Point?

Service Frequency on Port Washington Line

The Port Authority projects that rush hour trips from LaGuardia Airport to Penn Station will take just 33 minutes using the AirTrain and LIRR Port Washington commuter rail line.ⁱⁱ However, while the Port Washington line provides six trains per hour from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m., it only arrives every half hour from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., and every hour in the late evening. This infrequent service, if kept as is, will not be sufficient to handle increased demand from LaGuardia passengers. Further, LaGuardia AirTrain passengers will not just come from Penn Station, but also from eastern Queens and Long Island, yet Port Washington trains regularly skip stations like Flushing, Murray Hill, and Douglaston, particularly during peak hours. As such:

- Please provide a roadmap of planned service increases during peak, off-peak, and weekend hours for eastbound and westbound trains, including cost estimates for service increases as well as maximum peak-hour capacity on the Port Washington line.
- Does the LIRR plan to make more local stops so that residents of eastern Queens can get to LaGuardia Airport (and other locations) more quickly and reliably?

Cost of Fares

In 2017, the Port Authority administered a survey to "gauge the likely future use of AirTrain LGA by air passengers." While multiple price scenarios were offered, its base proposal was \$15 for the AirTrain+LIRR and \$11 for the AirTrain+Subway.ⁱⁱⁱ This price gap is inconsistent with the current fare structure, where a \$9 peak, one-way LIRR fare between Willets Point and Penn Station is \$6.25 *more* than a subway trip. As you know, I have long argued that LIRR fares for in-city trips are exorbitant and a major reason for low ridership at the LIRR stations in Queens.

- Given the importance of LaGuardia Airport as an employment hub and the fact that many LIRR stations are located in subway transit deserts, will the LIRR consider reducing in-city fares, both for trips to LaGuardia and all other locations within the five boroughs?

7 Train

Mets-Willets Point 7-Train Station Upgrades

In the MTA's 2015-2019 capital plan, \$50 million was allocated to New York City Transit to repair select elements within the Mets-Willets Point Station including the replacement of "street stairs, mezzanine to platform stairs, mezzanine floors, doors and windows, interior and exterior walls, and canopies as required." According to the MTA's capital dashboard, this project is 0% complete and "some schedule dates are not available, due to project being under development."

- Do you expect these upgrades will be completed and the station will be fully ADA accessible by 2022?
- If not, how will NYCT accommodate AirTrain passengers at Willets Point?

Service Frequency on 7 Train

The Port Authority has forecasted that 38 percent of AirTrain passengers would use the LIRR and 32 percent would use the subway.^{iv} The 7 Train, of course, has seen a dramatic increase in ridership in the last decade and has experienced significant overcrowding.

- While the recent installation of a modern signal system on the 7 Train will increase capacity, will these upgrades be enough to handle increased ridership from LaGuardia?
- Please provide a detailed roadmap of planned service increases during the peak, off-peak, and weekend hours for both eastbound and westbound 7 Trains, as well as cost estimates.
- With the 7 Train offering a lower fare and more frequent service than the LIRR Port Washington line, the forecasted 7 Train ridership to LaGuardia may be too conservative. If the 7 Train ultimately carries 50 or 75 percent of LaGuardia AirTrain passengers—rather than 32 percent—will it have the capacity to handle this influx in ridership?

Bus

The 7 Train and LIRR stations at Willets Point are currently accessible by only one bus route—the Q48—which travels from Flushing to LaGuardia Airport.

- Once the LaGuardia AirTrain is complete, will this route still be necessary?
- If so, do you anticipate significant service modifications to handle changes in ridership?

New York City Transit Bus and the MTA Bus Company are currently working on a Bus Network Redesign to reconfigure bus routing in Queens.

- Will the LaGuardia AirTrain be considered as part of this redesign process and, if so, will new routes be created to service the Willets Point Station?
- Will new bus connections to Willets Point be operated by the MTABC or NYCTB? As you know, the City is responsible for covering the entirety of the operating deficit for the MTA Bus Company (\$462 million in FY17), but not New York City Transit Bus.

Project Costs

When the LaGuardia AirTrain was first proposed in 2014, it was projected to cost \$450 million and be completed by 2019. That has since been revised to \$1.5 billion and 2022. Given the nature of New York City construction projects, these cost projections will likely continue to rise.

- Please provide a detailed cost-benefit analysis of the LaGuardia AirTrain and an explanation of the changing cost projection and timeline.
- How will the Port Authority specifically work to meet this new timeline and budget?

Thank you in advance for your timely responses to these questions. I look forward to an ongoing dialogue as the LaGuardia AirTrain project moves through public review and evaluation.

Sincerely,



Scott M. Stringer
New York City Comptroller

ⁱ The Port Authority of New York & New Jersey. "AirTrain LGA: LGA Ground Access Mode Choice Model And AirTrain Ridership Forecast 2025–2045," October 2018. Page 1.

ⁱⁱ The Port Authority of New York & New Jersey. "LGA Airport Access Improvement Project Purpose and Objectives and Analysis of Alternatives Report," October 2018. Table 1-8. Page 1-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Port Authority of New York & New Jersey. "AirTrain LGA: LGA Ground Access Mode Choice Model And AirTrain Ridership Forecast 2025–2045," October 2018. Page 7.

^{iv} *ibid*, Page 38.